

A “NO REGRETS” INVESTMENT

WHY WATER, SANITATION, AND HYGIENE IN HEALTHCARE FACILITIES MUST BE A FUNDING PRIORITY

Water, sanitation and hygiene conditions in healthcare facilities are dangerous and require urgent attention. Substantial investment is needed to improve and sustain health services to ensure safe and resilient facilities that provide high-quality healthcare.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

Sustainable water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) are the foundation of effective healthcare facilities, impacting every facet of quality, dignified patient care and healthcare staff safety. WASH is essential to prevent the most pressing health challenges, including COVID. Yet the 2020 Global Progress Report on WASH in healthcare facilities found that 1 in 4 healthcare facilities lacks basic water services, 1 in 3 lacks handwashing services where care is provided, and 1 in 10 does not have toilets or latrines. **These poor conditions put more than 1.8 billion people at greater risk for infection.**

The need to invest in this WASH foundation remains urgent, not only for capital investment, but also operations and maintenance and behavior change. The [UN Secretary-General’s Call to Action](#) in 2018 and the unanimously passed [World Health Assembly Resolution](#) in 2019 have paved the road for robust response. WHO, UNICEF, and the World Bank have developed a common articulation of what constitutes sustainable WASH coverage, including a fair estimate of its cost and why WASH is an essential health investment.

The evidence shows that WASH returns substantial benefits to human health and the integrity of health systems. [Poor-quality care in low- and middle-income countries imposes costs of US\\$1.4 to \\$1.6 trillion per year in lost productivity.](#) In addition, avoidable healthcare-acquired infections are a major burden on the health system; in the US alone, they cost the system an estimated [\\$US6.5 billion per year.](#)

Funding WASH in healthcare facilities is a ‘no-regrets’ investment; WASH services are necessary in order to achieve a range of healthcare priorities including **disease prevention, quality care, pandemic preparedness, effective health systems, and healthier and more productive communities.**

HOW TO RESPOND

The Global Progress Report demonstrates the clear need for more WASH in healthcare facilities and the data underscore the value of investment. Now, funders and implementers have an opportunity to help close this gap.

Articulation of the cost and benefits of WASH services creates a platform that can catalyze funding by a wide range of partners into integrated health system improvement strategies. Governments lead the process of mobilizing and coordinating investments. Public and private partnerships at the district-level have demonstrated effective pathways to scale up and may be a focal point for investment.

Partners should strive to advance country strategies and investment plans by:

- Allocating resources within their expertise or capacity (e.g., human, financial, technical) to address issues concerning WASH infrastructure, behavior change, system strengthening, etc.
- Communicating the prioritization of this issue to their missions.
- Seeking guidance as needed from WHO and UNICEF on opportunities for investment and mechanisms for development assistance.

BENEFITS OF INVESTING IN WASH IN HEALTHCARE FACILITIES

DISEASE PREVENTION

WASH is necessary in order to carry out basic infection prevention and control (IPC) measures, such as handwashing and facility cleanliness, which in turn reduce healthcare-acquired infections, [combat the spread of antimicrobial resistance](#), and effectively prevent a wide range of illnesses and disease. In low- and middle-income countries, an average of [1 out of every 6 patients contracts an infection](#) during his or her stay in a healthcare facility. Infections prolong hospital stays, create long-term disability, and cause unnecessary, preventable deaths. They represent a massive additional financial burden for health systems and generate high costs for patients and their families. Effective IPC reduces healthcare-acquired infections by [at least 30%](#) and improving hand hygiene practices reduces pathogen transmission in healthcare facilities [by 50%](#).

QUALITY CARE

WASH is a fundamental human right, increases patient satisfaction and uptake of services and is particularly important around the time of childbirth – when far too many mothers and newborns suffer and die, including from preventable conditions such as sepsis. Millions of women in the Least Developed Countries give birth in healthcare facilities with inadequate WASH. Babies born in low- and middle-income countries are [3 to 20 times more likely to develop infections](#) than those born in high-income countries.

PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS

COVID-19 has highlighted the absence of, and overwhelming [need for WASH](#) in order to ensure resilient healthcare facilities that are prepared to respond to pandemics, outbreaks, and climate threats without interrupting routine services. Global health security relies upon handwashing with soap and safe water - the first line of defense against dozens of infectious illnesses. During the [2014-16 Ebola outbreak](#), healthcare workers were 21-32 times more likely than non-healthcare workers to contract Ebola, with poor WASH in healthcare facilities being cited as a key risk factor.

EFFECTIVE HEALTH SERVICES

WASH in healthcare facilities contributes to better health outcomes, safer births, more cost-effective services, improved occupational safety for healthcare workers, higher patient satisfaction, and an overall stronger health system. Enhancing quality of care outcomes and, in turn, care-seeking behaviors and patient satisfaction through improved WASH services can improve health conditions for patients, families, and healthcare staff.

HEALTHIER AND MORE PRODUCTIVE COMMUNITIES

WASH provides the foundation for well-run healthcare systems that can generate improved community health and resilience and provide quality health services. WASH underpins human health and must be considered as a [key aspect of universal health coverage](#). [Poor-quality care](#) is responsible for the loss of over a trillion dollars each year in productivity.